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The Currency of Historicity in Hong Kong: Deconstructing Nostalgia through Soy Milk

Catherine S. CHAN

Abstract: In the 1980s, as the end of the millennium approached, the production of nostalgia exploded all around the world. For Hong Kong, nostalgia became a reminder of the golden age that had transformed the city into one of the “Four Asian Tigers” in the decades following the end of the Second World War. While yearning for the better days of the past, Hong Kong coincidentally experienced destabilisation. As the rest of the world, especially the “baby boomers,” mourned the end of a productive era, Hong Kong locals were disturbed by the affirmation of the handover to China in 1997. In the context of these events, a creative rush to nostalgia in cultural manufacturing swept across the city. In the hope of highlighting the uniqueness of nostalgic production in Hong Kong, this study analyses two sets of TV commercials produced by local beverage company Vitasoy. Through the deconstruction of selected historical events, Vitasoy successfully reinvented its brand and, in contrast to general criticism of the concept, generated a positive connotation for nostalgia on the path towards Hong Kong’s search for an identity.

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Keywords: Hong Kong, nostalgia, Vitasoy

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Introduction

The post-war era saw the explosive development of a revolutionary consumer culture that called for the sophistication of consumption through relentless advertising rooted in the production of imagery. Hong Kong experienced an economic miracle during this period and (together with Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) quickly emerged as one of the “Four Asian Tigers” by the 1980s. During the time that Hong Kong evolved from a British colony to a special administrative region (SAR) of China, much or little can be said about the identity of Hong Kong locals: they lacked political and national imagination, they were highly capitalist, and most of all they were inconsistent, wavering, and erratic. As a “borrowed place on borrowed time” (Hughes 1976), Hong Kong was suspended between East and West and torn between British-induced decolonisation in the late 1960s and the unsuccessful renationalisation after 1997. In this unique context, Hong Kong has survived as “a transcultural political entity that [is] neither Chinese nor British, neither Eastern nor Western” (Ho 1998: 40) and which is more specifically determined by the awareness and consumption of commercial trends (Fung 2008: 193) embedded in a Hong Kong “lifestyle” (Turner 1995: 22–23). In the face of a recurring identity crisis that follows the rises and falls of commercial movements, the currency of historicity has strongly increased due to social anxiety caused by an uncertain future. This is demarcated by Chan (1992) in his study of print advertising in three time periods: the refugee society from 1949 to 1967, the rise of a local identity and the economic boom between 1968 and 1984, and the political transition and gradual democratisation from 1984 to 1998.

This study aims to substantiate the growing influence of the past as a collective value in Hong Kong society by analysing two sets of soybean milk commercials by the local beverage company Vitasoy. These TV commercials, aired between the late 1980s and early 1990s, commonly adopted the practice of nostalgia, thus joining the surge of nostalgia in media and cultural representations after the signing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. In Hong Kong cinema, the association between identity and nostalgia can be observed, first, in the imitation of historical settings and the adaptation of the old cinematic style, dialogue, and plots of the 1950s and 1960s and, second, in the discontinuity of historicity through the reconstruction of the 1930s in the 1980s – for example, in Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge*, 1988 – or the re-

discovery of the 1950s in the 1990s – as in Peter Chan’s 1994 production *He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Father* (Chan 2000). In the process of renewing the image of its brand during the late 1980s, Vitasoy played the nostalgia card to cater for Hong Kong locals’ longing for the past. Through a closer look at both text and image, this paper further argues that Vitasoy’s TV commercials merged historical romance and personal nostalgia, shifting spatial and temporal logic in an attempt to resonate with consumers of different age groups by interspersing personal memory with collective imagination. Successfully marketing a traditional beverage in a highly commercial world no doubt requires effective strategy. By deconstructing Vitasoy’s commercials, this paper brings to light the power of nostalgia in reinventing traditions and tackling Hong Kong’s sense of loss in the face of social anxiety, especially after the Sino-British Joint Declaration and handover under an imminently weak sense of Hong Kong nationality and attachment vis-à-vis China.

The Weight of Historicity in Romancing the Past

Since the 1980s, the nostalgia industry has erupted in the area of advertising; similarly, there has been a constant increase in academic studies on the production of nostalgia. In their research on the American population, Havlena and Holak (1991) singled out two groups – “baby boomers” and senior citizens – as being highly prone to nostalgia owing to sociological transitions and “discontinuities in life cycle” as individuals adjust to the transition into middle age or retirement. For Showalter (1990), the increasing value of nostalgia in contemporary advertising could not be disengaged from the pervasiveness of the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon. Stern (1992) further agreed with Havlena and Holak’s observation, stating,

The *fin-de-siècle* syndrome is heightened because of an unprecedented temporal coincidence: the century is ending just as the largest group in the population – the “baby boomers” – also must face its own mortality, signalled by reaching the age of fifty. (Stern 1992: 388)

The gist of the aforementioned studies seems to be that nostalgia is inevitably expressed in a number of ways: First, romance is implanted in the search for “some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space” (Frye 1973: 186). Second, in the process of fabricating the

golden age, usually represented by the past, universal virtues such as goodness, faith, and happiness are enhanced for collective acknowledgment, with negative elements simultaneously filtered out to recreate a solid, fundamental conviction that “things were better in the past” (Davis 1979: 21). Third, the spatial setting is often a “home” in order to evoke familiarity in time and space, ultimately “triggering the perceiver’s memory [...] to stimulate identification with cherished reminders of one’s past” (Stern 1992: 389). In other words, nostalgia is a manufactured re-experiencing of the past that appeals to consumers according to two dimensions: collective recollection based on historical nostalgia and private recollection based on Holbrook and Schindler’s (1989) concept of “personal theme.” The commercial production of nostalgia becomes a romantic retrospection of selected past values to be used in the construction of present identities (Griffiths, Chapman, and Christiansen 2010).

It is evident that advertising efforts and TV productions in Hong Kong from the mid-1980s onwards have consistently utilised nostalgia. Ma (1998) undertook a study of a 1996 TV production by Hong Kong television broadcaster TVB entitled *Hong Kong Legend*, in which he made the following reference to the local manifestation of the global nostalgic trend for the purpose of strengthening collective identity at a time of tremendous change:

In the year before the sovereignty change in July 1997, magazines and newspapers produced specials and supplements on histories and collective memories of post-war Hong Kong [...]. In all the major electronic media there were programmes on historical and nostalgic themes. (Ma 1998: 337)

In Ma’s analysis of a 60-second TV commercial aired by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation in 1995, he once more tackled the commitment of nostalgic media in Hong Kong to modernity, as evidenced by its emphasis on historicity and the urge to rediscover the city’s authentic past. Significantly, Ma asserted that, ironically, in the case of Hong Kong’s production and consumption of nostalgia, “the currency of historicity is actually enhancing the ideological power of nostalgic practices” (Ma 2001: 138). By extending the link between historicity and commercial nostalgia in Hong Kong, this study proposes that, although local nostalgia is part of a global trend, the value of both past and future developments stand out remarkably in the process of nostalgic production in the city,

which I categorise into three stages. In the face of an uncertain future, post-1984, the people of Hong Kong longed for the less anxious golden era of the 1960s and 1970s. After the Tiananmen Square massacre, Sigmund Freud's nostalgia, defined by Daniels as "the desire to return to a hidden home [...] through the half-forgotten memories of another time, festooned and elaborated by our present fantasies" (Daniels 1985: 379), was realised in Hong Kong's nostalgia industry through the blurring of temporal and spatial settings.

For 75 years, Vitasoy has been a constant part of Hong Kong's ever-changing commercial market, branching out to Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Singapore as well. In the last few years, the company has consolidated its position as one of the top three brands of dairy-free alternatives in Southern China. In addition to illustrating the link between the production of nostalgia and the romanticising of historicity, the deconstruction (Saussure 1966; Barthes 1972; Lévi-Strauss 1970; Foucault 1970; Lacan 1968) of selected TV commercials through the interpretation of both the verbal and visual texts (Dyer 1982; Frith 1997) helps highlight the role of nostalgia in the reinvention of old traditions. The commercial value of nostalgia has long been discussed in scholarly works. For instance, in his study of socialism-related branding in Bulgaria, Dimitrov (2011) substantiates the function of nostalgia in post-socialist Bulgaria, where the ousting of the old regime has been accompanied by social discontinuities. Winters (1990: 16), on the other hand, remarks that nostalgic campaigns in advertising make the most of the "gift" of brand equity carried by old products, and Ruml (1946, cited in Martin 1954) summarises the overall marketability of nostalgic production as a phenomenon older than human nature, appealing to people of all ages and temperaments.

References to soy and tofu, long part of the traditional Chinese food culture, can be found in various historical records in China. A poem entitled "The Tofu Poem" (豆腐詩, *doufu shi*) from the time of the Song dynasty describes the details of tofu production, and the *Compendium of Materia Medica* (本草綱目, *bencao gangmu*) further traces the invention of tofu back to Liu An, a Han dynasty Chinese prince and nephew to Emperor Wu. In light of the long history of soy, Vitasoy considers its soybean beverage to be of traditional therapeutic value and an integral part of Chinese medicine (Vitasoy 2011). This paper argues that, in a rapidly changing market, Vitasoy has so far

been successful in reinventing the old idea of soy milk in an urban society by using historical nostalgia. Davis (1979: 14) refers to nostalgia's power as being derived from enveloping the past in a "redeemingly benign aura." The juxtaposition of this "feel-good" cultural, generational, and personal memory with a product currently in use has enabled Vitasoy's business to flourish in today's Hong Kong. By reconstructing history in today's sense through advertising, Vitasoy has positioned its brand in close proximity to the construction, maintenance, and rediscovery of the Hong Kong identity. Vitasoy, an otherwise traditional brand, has become empowered by aligning itself with social developments.

A Brief Overview of Vitasoy's Story

The Vitasoy Company was founded in 1940 by Dr. K. S. Lo. After the Second World War, Vitasoy initially consolidated its image as an inexpensive milk substitute for the Chinese population of Hong Kong, the majority of whom were either malnourished as a result of the war or refugees who had fled the communist regime after 1949. Lo's main objective in establishing Vitasoy was to create "a source of supply of nutritious food which is cheap enough to be within the reach of the masses" (Vitasoy n.d.). On its first day of production, only nine bottles of Vitasoy were sold – at six cents per bottle and through door-to-door bicycle delivery. But by the mid-1950s, at the time of Hong Kong's industrialisation and general technological improvements in sterilisation and refrigeration, Vitasoy was selling 12 million bottles each year. The image of Vitasoy as the "poor people's milk" was affirmed by a 1957 newspaper column which praised Vitasoy's role in offering protein, fats, minerals, and vitamins that could otherwise only be obtained from less affordable foodstuffs such as chicken and milk (Jun 1957: 2). Until the late 1960s, Vitasoy persisted with the same branding, which was a big concept condensed into a little bean under a symbolic name that Cai (1990: 19) explains as a combination of "vitality" (Vita) and "a healthy choice" (soy).

Until the early 1970s, Vitasoy continued to expand in line with global developments and Hong Kong's economic and cultural transitions. At the height of Vitasoy's growth, the company's steady advancement was challenged by two downturns – the OPEC price hike and the US soybean embargo. As a result, in 1974 the cost of manu-

facturing soy milk tripled and the price of Vitasoy sharply increased. Vitasoy was no longer the “poor people’s milk.” An untimely recession caused the company’s sales to fall drastically from 100.8 million bottles in 1970 to 80.4 million in 1975. Therefore, in 1975 Vitasoy decided to revamp its brand by making a number of changes. With the rapid expansion of supermarket chains that did not want to be inconvenienced with recycling, the company adopted the use of Tetra Brik Aseptic packaging and ultra-high-temperature (UHT) processing, in order to lengthen the product’s shelf life (Hong Kong RTHK Television 2012).

As Hong Kong’s gross domestic product continued to rise and consumption became more diversified, the consumer market came to be dominated by “baby boomers” and young consumers who related to Western popular culture more than earlier generations had. Notably, a local Hong Kong identity also evolved, particularly after the violent 1967 Leftist riots, which sent Hong Kong locals scurrying for British protection from mainland China. Having unexpectedly gained the support of these Hong Kong locals, the British government initiated selected welfare measures in the 1970s, such as the 10-year housing plan launched in 1973 and the nine-year free education plan in 1978. A sense of belonging also began to unfold in popular culture, where “Cantopop,” a hybrid of traditional and Western pop music, became mainstream. Guitar-playing singers such as Sam Hui and bands that covered English pop, such as The Wynners, rose to fame. A TV series produced by Radio Television Hong Kong, entitled *Below the Lion Rock*, skyrocketed to popularity between 1972 and 1979 for depicting the life stories and memories of Hong Kong locals from the previous two decades.

Two of Vitasoy’s promotional stills (Figure 1), one from the 1960s and the other from 1974, reveal how Vitasoy rebuilt its market image to complement social transitions. The black-and-white poster from the 1960s features a common man drinking a bottle of Vitasoy. The man is dressed in a white shirt, dark-skinned, and physically fit. He epitomises a working man, and thus reflects the social role and economic situation of the majority of Hong Kong’s Chinese population at the time. Until 1975, the company’s slogan – “Vitasoy makes you taller, stronger and more attractive” – exemplified Vitasoy’s market image as a nutritious and healthy option. As part of its brand repackaging in 1975, Vitasoy released a more colourful promotional

still image. It is dominated by vivid young people sporting the trendy shaggy hairstyle of the 1970s. The imagery, with the iconic bottle and a guitar placed side by side and the Tetra Brik packaging in the foreground, further highlights Vitasoy's attempt to reinvent its image in order to appeal to younger consumers and the emerging local culture. This is evidenced not just by the use of colloquial Cantonese in the new slogan – “more than a simple soft drink” – but also by the unexpected choice of people in the background, who mirrored the fact that Hong Kong was becoming more cosmopolitan. Vitasoy's new slogan placed the soy milk between tradition and modernity, no longer conventional Chinese soy milk but more than a Western soft drink (Ma 1999). The engineer behind the slogan, Ki Man Fung, recalls that “more than a simple soft drink” unexpectedly became a trend, and Vitasoy's marketing strategy at that stage was no doubt to replace its old image by repackaging the soybean drink as a soft drink (Ki 1984: 122–123). This marks Hong Kong's rapid transition from a refugee-dominated society of mainland Chinese in the 1960s to a Hong Kong identity that straddled both worlds.

Figure 1. Vitasoy Promotional Still



Source: Cai 1990: 70, 79.

Note: The promotional still on the left, used during the 1950s and into the 1960s, reflects the less affluent lifestyle in post-war Hong Kong, which was marked by the influx of poor refugees from China. On the right, more vibrant, modern elements are incorporated as Vitasoy attempts to reposition itself into a younger consumer market.

Figure 2. Stills from Vitasoy's 1983 Commercial with a More Youthful Feeling



Source: Cai 1990: 85.

Note: Vitasoy's 1983 commercial was an attempt to generate a more youthful image that corresponded to the growing mix of cultures in 1980s Hong Kong. The setting and dancers mirror Hong Kong's growing confidence and simultaneously reposition Vitasoy as a leisure consumption product.

The endeavour to transform the drink into more of a leisure product than a traditional nutritious drink was further enhanced by Vitasoy's 1983 TV commercial. This ad incorporated elements of Western popular culture and exuded the city's growing confidence, which was the result of a vibrant economy and the consolidation of the local culture during the previous decade. Market statistics had revealed that the age range of soft drink consumers during the 1980s was predominantly 16 to 25; in order to compete with the expanding beverage market in Hong Kong, the soy milk company invested more than 1 million HKD to produce the TV commercial. Against the backdrop of Hong Kong's skyscrapers and neon colours, the commercial features nine young dancers wearing tight, acid-washed jeans and sporting big cheap plastic earrings, both of which were common fashion trends in the 1980s (Figure 2). Adopting another Western fashion of

the 1980s, the commercial featured a song that echoed Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean." The bilingual slogan (English version: "Taste the feeling [...] no other soft drink tastes like Vitasoy; good taste, good feel [...] the one and only.") reflects the increased blending of Eastern and Western cultures during this era in Hong Kong and Vitasoy's move away from its image as a traditionally nutritious beverage to that of a soft drink (Ki 1984: 126). Soft drinks are typically drinks that contain carbonated water, flavouring, and sweetener, and are also called soda or carbonated beverages. Vitasoy's rebranding as part of this category confirmed the company's intention to move away from its conventional image – one that was no longer competitive in view of Hong Kong's heterogeneous culture. According to Ma (1999), the set of TV commercials made under Vitasoy's marketing strategy during this period depicted modern settings and characters – one at a disco, another in an office, and a third showing competing gymnasts – all of which exhibited the new-found cultural confidence and energy of 1980s Hong Kong.

Masking Ambivalence through Reinvention

As the West coped with its anxiety about the approach of the *fin-de-siècle* in the 1980s by rushing to mass-produce nostalgia, Hong Kong experienced a number of developments that signalled the fast-approaching end of an old era and the beginning of a new epoch. In 1984, the announcement of the Sino-British Joint Declaration confirmed the city's imminent return to mainland China in 1997 and the end of the British regime. While the anxiety brought about by this announcement and the uncertainties of a future under China's governance were still fresh in the people's minds, the death of an estimated 2,000 civilians (Kristof 1989) during the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, also known as the June Fourth Incident, terrorised Hong Kong locals and shattered their remaining optimism for the city's future beyond 1997. This led to an emigration trend that continued throughout the 1990s. In 1986, nearly 19,000 Hong Kong Chinese emigrated to Canada, the United States, Australia, and other countries, and in 1989, a further 42,000 fled the city (Faure 1997: 368). With skilled people leaving in droves and Hong Kong deprived of the glorious era associated with the previous two decades, familiar anchors disappeared and Hong Kong locals were left vulnerable,

insecure, and feeling like they had little control over their lives and future. It was in this situation that historicity emerged as a crucial bulwark that Hong Kong locals collectively understood, shared, and took solace in. In this light, Chow describes Hong Kong's nostalgia in 1990 as postcolonial, reflecting the city's

simulacra of late capitalist technological advancement, the terror of Communist takeover in barely seven years, the continual influx of unwanted refugees, the continual outflow of prized citizens. (Chow 1993: 144)

It was in this context that Vitasoy, realising the lack of public enthusiasm for its previous advertising campaign, adopted nostalgia for the four sets of commercials produced between the late 1980s and the early years of the new millennium. The touch of nostalgia expressed throughout this time period did not remain consistent, but it did remain coherent in terms of the idea of reflective nostalgia, which Boym (2001: 50) defines as “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” and as choosing to “explore ways of inhabiting many places at once” due to the absence of a coherent “home.” In the four sets of commercials, the theme of reflective nostalgia is omnipresent, with creative dialogue generated through collective local memory rather than through national metanarratives of linear progress (Ladino 2004: 90). I demonstrate below that the spatial and temporal settings of these TV commercials, whether they are independently analysed or tied together as one big production – being experiments with different concepts of time, geographical settings, and cultural backgrounds – all hint at various social transitions but do not depict historical and social realities. Ultimately, the traditional nature of soy milk is reinvented by recovering old memories and the familiar past in avant-garde ways using innovative settings.

The first set of Vitasoy advertisements comprised three TV commercials that aired between 1988 and 1991 and which attempted to rebrand the product as a classic beverage (Ma 1999). They were highly popular, receiving a Clio Award nomination in 1989. As Cai (1990: 86) points out, the intimate feeling that came from Vitasoy's enduring place in the childhood memories of many Hong Kong locals since the 1950s emerged during this period as a marketable advantage that the manufacturers of other products could not achieve. As a soy milk, it seemed impossible for Vitasoy to be regarded as trendy, yet the localness and familiarity of the brand was endowed

with new meaning and worth at a time of uncertainty and the search for a national identity. Shot with aesthetic nostalgia, the first TV commercial begins with a teenage girl drinking Vitasoy, cuts to another girl riding her bicycle with a gigantic Vitasoy truck in the background, and then continues with a series of ordinary people engaged in various activities at different times: two muscular men playing beach volleyball, two lovers at a park, older people at a party (Figure 3), a fashionable woman on a shopping spree, a student reading a book, and a young bride with her mother (Figure 3). The commercial closes with the sentimental image of a father carrying his little daughter, who is holding a carton of Vitasoy (Figure 4), as they slowly walk away from the sunset. Representing various age groups from different walks of life, the slogan “You must have been a beautiful baby” and the lyrics “you must have been a beautiful baby / you must have been a beautiful child / ’cuz baby, take a look at you now / baby, take a look at you now” suggested that Vitasoy was present in the lives of Hong Kong locals as they matured, got married, and grew older. Notably, the final scene depicts Vitasoy being passed from the previous generation to the new generation.

Figure 3. Stills from Vitasoy’s 1988 Commercial



Source: YouTube 2010a.

Note: The 1988 commercial highlights important life milestones, pieced together by images that invite consumers to re-experience and recall their own personal memories.

Figure 4. Image of Different Generations from Vitasoy's 1988 Commercial



Source: Cai 1990: 88.

Note: This is the last image shown in Vitasoy's 1988 commercial, portraying kinship and warmth as the father protectively holds his daughter, who represents the new generation of soy milk consumers.

As a local icon that had persisted throughout the various social experiences of Hong Kong, Vitasoy used its TV commercials during this period to exploit nostalgia, idealising the past as a time of pure innocence and evoking memories associated with Vitasoy itself as a symbol of the past. In the other two TV commercials produced in this series, the soy milk beverage appears consistently in almost every shot, and the touch of nostalgia is escalated as the song “You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby” is played at a slower tempo to create a mellower mood. The 1989 commercial (Figure 5), like the first commercial, features different faces from all age ranges; with relaxing music playing in the background, the characters in the commercial stare at the camera, which moves along at a slow pace. The image of a baby appears in the final shot, emphasising that Vitasoy acknowledges both the old and new generations of Hong Kong locals as

Figure 5. Stills from Vitasoy's 1989 Commercial



Source: YouTube 2010b.

Note: In Vitasoy's 1989 commercial, the image of the soy milk beverage appears more frequently than in the one from 1988, and the slower tempo of both the music and the moving frame escalates the aesthetic nostalgia.

“beautiful babies,” in the old days and at the present time. In the 1991 commercial, instead of looking to the future by depicting the new generation in the last scenes, Vitasoy reverses the previous idea by featuring an elderly couple walking hand in hand down the beach at sunset (Figure 6). By not limiting the TV commercials to a particular time period, Vitasoy's productions served as a form of both historical and personal nostalgia, which appealed to a wider audience. For younger consumers, the portrayal of different milestones in life depicted a time in the past before the audience was born (historical nostalgia); for mature consumers, personal memories were revived in response to the images presented by Vitasoy (personal nostalgia). Whether as “the way I was” or “the way it was” (Marchegiani and Phau 2013: 183), Vitasoy reinvented itself as a marker of history through these commercials. Consequently, by 1988, when Hong Kong was in the process of coming to terms with the political change

due in less than a decade, Vitasoy had become a familiar brand that locals had learned to trust. With the help of the aforementioned images, text, and jumbled temporal concept, Vitasoy's commercials during this period successfully projected a contrast between "certainty and uncertainty, solidity and flux" (Williams 2002: 203), portraying a partial, idealised history that Hong Kong needed in light of its citizens' dissatisfaction and worry in the late 1980s.

Figure 6. Still of Final Scene from Vitasoy's 1991 Commercial



Source: YouTube 2010c.

Note: The last shot of the third commercial based on the theme "you must have been a beautiful baby" depicts two elderly people. This was a deviation from the previous two commercials, which each used the new generation in their final scene. The historical and personal nostalgia expressed in these three TV commercials repositioned Vitasoy as an icon of the "better days."

Fragmented Spaces between Hong Kong and China

In Ma's (2001: 153) study of another nostalgic local advertisement, from 1995, he points out how the relationship between historical fact

and Hong Kong's capitalism disciplines time into "a homogenous, abstract, linear and progressive notion of historical development" where the past is forever lost. In the context of Hong Kong's obsession with the economic miracle heyday, the reconstruction of historicity is consigned to a linear temporal structure that exploits the usual storyline of the city's economic progress whereby locals worked hard and overcame hardships, collectively building Hong Kong into the affluent city that it is today.

The following two sets of Vitasoy commercials demonstrate the reconstruction of a postmodern historicity, which contrasts with Ma's (2001) observation of a linear temporal structure in the narrative of Hong Kong's TV commercials. To further extend the absence of a chronological progression in Vitasoy's "you must have been a beautiful baby" advertising campaign, the next set of TV commercials attempted to capture the city's search for a "home," making use of historical developments to portray Vitasoy as a local icon in view of the inopportune transformations attached to the 1997 handover. Significantly, the idea of nostalgia through spatial dislocation is discernible in this set of two TV commercials, one of which aired in 1992 and the other in 1993. This is in accordance with Malpas's (2012: 162) claim that nostalgia must always be both spatial and temporal, originating from an aching or longing that comes with a separation from the past and an apparent contact with an "experience of familiar sounds, smells, sights that invoke the presence of home even in its absence." Vitasoy's 1992 and 1993 TV commercials tried to conceal two unwelcome factual developments in Hong Kong: the longing for a distant home in the emigration craze and the prospect of a home that would be technically existent but generally not well received after the 1997 handover. As I demonstrate, both ads portrayed Vitasoy as an iconic commodity that aroused nostalgic feelings in three different geographical spaces, thereby suggesting the significant role of the soy milk and a collective desire for the past in light of uncertainties about the future and Hong Kong's fate following the impending handover, which was beyond Hongkongers' control.

Vitasoy's 1992 TV commercial fuses together two locations in two time periods, switching back and forth and using a string of images. The narrative begins on a rainy day at UC Berkeley, where a young man looks up at the sky and recalls another rainy day, this time in Hong Kong: he had finished class and found his father waiting for

him across the street with an umbrella (Figure 7). A series of old and new images appear next, alternating between Hong Kong and San Francisco. The young man, recognisable as an exchange student at Berkeley, rides his bicycle past the Golden Gate Bridge, and the footage is intermingled with flashes of memories: drinking Vitasoy with old school mates in Hong Kong, his parents seeing him off at the airport, and finally his arrival in San Francisco's Chinatown, where he buys a box of Vitasoy. In the background, a mellow song plays with the lyrics "no matter where you are, the heart does not change / 'til the end of time, I look forward to walking with you." The commercial ends with the young man drinking Vitasoy, smiling a little and looking into the distance as the text emerges with the words: "any-time, anywhere, thinking of you, [Vitasoy]" (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Images from Vitasoy's 1992 Commercial Mirroring Hong Kong's Emigration Craze



Source: YouTube 2010d.

Note: The 1992 commercial features images from two locations and two time periods: the present in San Francisco and the past in Hong Kong. The rainy weather against the backdrop of the Berkeley campanile connects with nostalgic images of the main character's father waiting for him after school with an umbrella.

Figure 8. Still from the Final Scene of Vitasoy's 1992 Commercial



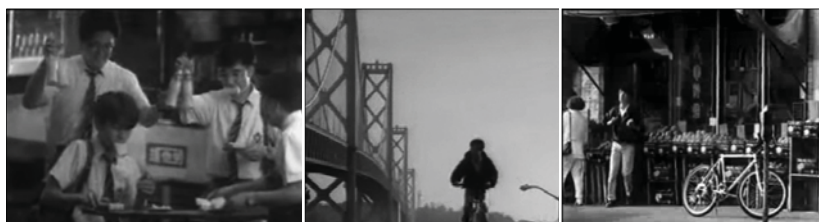
Source: YouTube 2010d.

Note: The final scene of the commercial takes place in San Francisco's Chinatown, depicting the young exchange student taking a sip of the soybean milk as he looks into the distance. The text "anytime, anywhere, thinking of you" (何時何地, 都想念你, *heshi hedi, dou xiangnian ni*) is narrated with the word "Vitasoy" by way of a voice-over, suggesting first, the homesickness of the character as he recalls Hong Kong from overseas, and second, Vitasoy's supportiveness and encouragement to Hong Kong locals as a "feeling of home" to remedy their nostalgia.

The word "nostalgia" was first coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688 as a clinical term for homesickness or a state of moral pain related to separation from family and a familiar social environment. It was later clarified by Roberta Rubenstein to be a temporal concept. The production of nostalgia in Vitasoy's 1992 commercial is initially based on the temporal dislocation reflected in the character's detachment from his childhood and family, which is associated not only with the spatially distant Hong Kong but also, and more specifically, with memories that lie in the past. In the commercial, Vitasoy unifies the spatial and temporal trajectories of nostalgia: for the young character, the ideal place is Hong Kong, the ideal time is his childhood, and the

common link is Vitasoy. As the two places and time periods appear sequentially in the 30-second production, Vitasoy bridges the two locations and times, becoming the one thing that is the root of the nostalgia (Figure 9). For the young exchange student, the drink creates a recollection of the past, increasing his yearning for his family and simultaneously offering familiarity and comfort to ease the pain of nostalgia. This is exactly what Boym (2001: 4) points out in her early discourse on the history of nostalgia: experiences or objects that elicit a brief longing for home help achieve a certain amount of homecoming, temporarily relieving the symptoms of nostalgia but, as a consequence, actually exacerbating the problem. Whether as a source of pain or comfort, Vitasoy is depicted as transcending spatial and temporal instabilities, a mainstay in a highly insecure world. By positioning the soy milk beverage as part of the Hong Kong experience that evoked homesickness and offered a feeling of home, Vitasoy re-established itself as an icon of the Hong Kong locality in the 1990s, portraying itself as a homesickness remedy for the many locals who had migrated to other countries and serving as an enduring connection to the outside world for those who stayed behind.

Figure 9. Stills from Vitasoy's 1992 Commercial Featuring Hong Kong and San Francisco



Source: YouTube 2010d.

Note: Appearing in a temporal arrangement that is clearly non-linear, the images in the TV commercial offer a glimpse of life in Hong Kong and San Francisco. Between familiarity and separation, Vitasoy appears as a fixture in both the temporal and the geographical spaces.

In its nostalgic 1993 TV commercial, Vitasoy tackles the approaching fate of Hong Kong's handover. The storyline starts with a Hong Kong teenager visiting his grandfather in mainland China, saying, "I finally met the grandfather that dad describes as strict." A melodra-

matic progression quickly evolves in the relationship between the teenager and his grandfather. At first the old man appears distant and stern, but after the young man falls from a tree in the next scene, the old man massages his grandson's injury, then brings out a box of old photographs. They end up laughing together as they go through the pictures (Figure 10). In the final scene, the teenager looks out of the train window, apparently on his way back to Hong Kong, and watches his grandfather in the background as he makes a great effort to cross the train rails to buy a pack of Vitasoy (Figure 11). Notably, the idea of the final scene was modelled on an important image from the modern poet and writer Zhu Ziqing's (朱自清) classic essay *Retreating Figure* (背影, *beijing*). The lyrics of the background song resemble those from the 1992 TV commercial:

You will be with me, full of warm laughter / the feelings have not changed, because of your familiar face / no matter where I go, true emotions will remain / 'til the end of time, you will be with me after all.

As the train moves away, the young man stands up, desperate for a final glimpse of his grandfather. His narration concludes with, "I will miss this holiday forever," followed by the slogan, "It is Vitasoy after all."

Figure 10. Stills from Vitasoy's 1993 Commercial Depicting Mainland China



Source: YouTube 2010e.

Note: Although it is situated in the present, the TV commercial portrays the discovery of a new type of nostalgia. The young character becomes acquainted with his grandfather for the first time and ultimately concludes that he will forever miss their time together in China.

General analyses of the 1993 TV commercial commonly associate its central theme with the 1997 handover. Xian, Chen, and Mai (2005: 119) suggest that this TV commercial approached the dilemma of 1997 by reconstructing a sense of kinship between Hong Kong and mainland China. Ma (1999) asserts that the kinship depicted reflected a broader sense of Chinese nationality by linking Hong Kong and mainland China, as demonstrated by the teenager's return to his father's home in search of his roots. For Ma, the use of imagery from *Retreating Figure*, a compulsory read in Hong Kong's education curriculum, successfully expresses the bond between Hong Kong and China based on Chinese tradition. Reassessing the TV commercial based on the concept of nostalgia, we can observe how the previous four productions indirectly reflected historical developments by fabricating nostalgia; however, none elicited historicity as strongly as the 1993 production. By hinting at a reunion between Hong Kong and mainland China, Vitasoy attempted to construct an optimistic narrative of the future represented by the character's connection with the past and old traditions: a box of old pictures signified the crucial element that allowed the two characters to become acquainted. In addition, the adaptation of Zhu Ziqing's classic was nostalgic in itself, with the scene in the Vitasoy commercial reflecting the author's longing for his father, which was reflected in the vision of his father's back as he climbed with great effort onto the railway platform to buy the author a bag of tangerines. Although the teenager in Vitasoy's version had only recently reunited with his grandfather, their pre-existing kinship quickly reconnected the two, and it appears that the image of his grandfather's back would remain as a remnant of a beautiful time spent together. The various images in the commercial were bound together by the consistent appearance of Vitasoy, a commodity that connected the two separate areas (Hong Kong and mainland China) both spatially and temporally. The final scene of the TV commercial eliminated the remoteness that existed at the beginning, and Vitasoy connected the teenager and the old man emotionally (Figure 11), leading to the teenager's new-found yearning for his grandfather and for a homeland that was in reality not embraced in Hong Kong.

Vitasoy's 1993 commercial demonstrates that the mirror of historicity within nostalgia provides more than a mere buffer against the future, and is not always, as Ma (2001) argues, part of the search for

an authentic past. By reconstructing an imagined kinship tie between Hong Kong and mainland China, the TV commercial explores a fabricated past, exploiting nostalgic emotions in order to create the potential for an optimistic future, all in relation to the historical reality of the 1997 handover.

Figure 11. Images of *Beiyong* from Vitasoy's 1993 Commercial



Source: YouTube 2010e.

Note: These two images are contemporary adaptations of Zhu Ziqing's 1925 classic, *Retreating Figure*, and the final scene is a strong representation of Vitasoy as an object that bridges the temporal and spatial separation between Hong Kong and mainland China. Zhu Ziqing's literary work is well known as a collection of memories about his father.

Postmodernism theorist Jameson (1984: 65–66) believes that nostalgia is one of postmodernism's ways of suppressing the past, and a "random cannibalisation of all styles of the past." In Vitasoy's case, the 1993 production was a recreation of the distant past, depicting a simulated image of a historical period that belonged to the decades of post-war Hong Kong rather than projecting historical fact. This use of fragmented pieces of Hong Kong's historical past and present no doubt reflects the discontinuous character of postmodern historicity, which can be further understood in the context of Hong Kong's search for an identity. The rediscovery of an authentic past verifies collective existence but does not complete the identity-making picture. As Davis remarks,

nostalgia (like long-term memory, like reminiscence, like day-dreaming) is deeply implicated in the sense of who we are, what we are about, and (though possibly with much less inner clarity) whither we go. In short, nostalgia is one of the means – or, better,

one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses – we employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities. (Davis 1979: 31)

In Chan's (2000: 264) study of nostalgic films made before the hand-over of Hong Kong, she identifies Hong Kong's sense of loss and temporal disorder as the basis for an identity search associated with a rewriting of history in order to foresee the future. Vitasoy's 1993 production authentically exhibits the role of nostalgia in Hong Kong's identity reconstruction. By rewriting historicity to rediscover a waning kinship between Hong Kong and China, the present is revisited in a warmer light to make way for more optimistic speculation about the future. Four years before the handover, the TV commercial perceived the present as history, revealing more about the present than about past realities.

Rebranding through Reinvention

By the turn of the millennium, Hong Kong had overcome the qualms of 1997. Despite the emergence of new challenges in a transnational era and the city's new position as an SAR, the search for a Hong Kong identity had not been interrupted. In 2001 a local survey recorded a new low for the percentage of Hong Kong residents who identified simply as Chinese, while the percentage who associated with the idea of being a Hongkonger had reached a groundbreaking high (*HKU POP SITE* 2011). This demonstrates the growing desire for a local identity that was unique and distinguishable from a broader Chinese identity that might otherwise have represented an overarching unity between Hong Kong, China, Macau, and Taiwan. Hong Kong's identity construction, spurred by destabilising developments over the previous two decades, certainly could not escape the pursuit of popular history and a desire for the past to help cope with the rapidly changing present. This desire for historicity can be understood, in particular, as "an art of memory" (Hutton 1993), a reconstruction of historicity from the present point of view that takes place during times of temporal and spatial dislocation. The result is a marginalised history, embedded in social experiences and cultural markers of everyday life that are easily recognisable and acknowledged by the common masses. In the two sets of commercials produced by Vitasoy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, local images of Hong Kong are

emphasised heavily: in the universal imagination of a light-hearted past; in the juxtaposition of Hong Kong and San Francisco as home and foreign land, respectively; in the reproduction of a non-existent kinship in light of a destabilised present; or simply in a bottle or carton of Vitasoy. In the process of manufacturing localness, historicity inevitably becomes a resource that is revisited and rewritten with the aim of reinventing and repositioning old brand names.

Since the 1970s, Vitasoy's TV commercials have successfully conveyed social and cultural transformations in Hong Kong. Ma (1999) is of the opinion that Vitasoy's commercials not only exhibited the atmosphere and feeling of the 1970s and 1980s but also shaped consumer emotion towards Vitasoy. He argues that this emotion persisted in the productions of the 1990s. Nostalgic feelings of Hong Kong's past were projected and recalled, and by choosing Vitasoy, consumers were not just drinking soy milk. Instead of committing to the projection of an accurate, factual past that was presented in a linear, progressive manner, Vitasoy saw the need to fabricate a history that would, first, accommodate its presence in a world that was remembered by the older generation but unknown to younger generations and, second, give renewed meaning to a traditional beverage that plausibly traced its origins back to the early Han dynasty. In the first set of commercials, Vitasoy appeared as an old, trusted companion, passed down from one generation to another by members of a happy, flourishing community that evidently filtered out negative recollections and feelings. In the next set of TV commercials, Vitasoy extended this image of trust, subsequently identifying itself as a symbol of Hong Kong, of localness, and of home, while hinting at unwelcome historical developments that were causing anxiety in Hong Kong society. By rewriting fragments of the past without the constraint of authenticity, Vitasoy was able to establish itself as a trusted commodity in an ever-changing world, offering a feeling of stability and security in the face of the dramatic transformation of Hong Kong during and after the 1980s. The company's future marketing endeavours are expected to utilise the same nostalgically happy brand image, which would not be possible if its ads reflected real historical events. Without a linear temporal structure it is easier to work with ambivalence, and creative dialogue is more easily accepted when it is accompanied by selected collective memories.

Whether as a marketing asset or a cultural concept, nostalgia has long been criticised for its bittersweet romanticism of the past. Lowenthal (1989: 27) suggests that nostalgia is often accused of being “ersatz, vulgar, demeaning, misguided, inauthentic, sacrilegious, retrograde, reactionary, criminal, fraudulent, sinister, and morbid.” This is typically the case for capitalist productions, where nostalgia is viewed by consumers as a postmodern cultural paralysis that celebrates the “imaginary style of a real past” (Jameson 1990: 85). Nostalgia is often associated with terms that have negative connotations, such as “conservative,” “regressive,” “ahistorical,” or “defeatist.” However, the TV commercials studied here demonstrate that the nostalgic reconstruction of historicity in a postmodern sense does not have to be based on authenticity but – in a similar way to the reconfigured discourse of eating bitterness (吃苦, *chiken*) in China’s explorations of a feasible solution for coping with contemporary developments – depends, rather, on finding many ways to reach another destination (Griffiths and Zeuthen 2014). In Hong Kong’s ongoing search for an identity, the absence of a single heritage is apparently problematic, yet the realities of the colonial past and the awkwardness of the city’s relationship with mainland China have proven insufficient in the construction of a feasible, collectively acknowledged identity. By rewriting the past, nostalgia potentially “signal[s] the breach between the past and present” to “inaugurate a search for [a] remedy” (Ritvoi 2002: 39).

Based on the analysis of the Vitasoy TV advertisements, nostalgia can be progressive, transformative, or even constructive. In the case of the company’s rebranding process, the past was fabricated to blend reality with fantasy for marketing purposes. By the end of the process, a traditional brand had been reinvented and, at the same time, potential solutions for coping with social destabilisation had been put forward. Significantly, a vicious cycle emerged in the context of nostalgia: inevitable future uncertainties led to a yearning for the past which, when relieved through the consumption of Vitasoy, led to even more recollections and memories of inner desires. Taking the example of the exchange student in Vitasoy’s 1992 commercial, his homesickness was temporarily eased by drinking a box of Vitasoy. The box of Vitasoy, in turn, sparked a string of old images; although the consumer was overwhelmed by the happy memories associated with Vitasoy, the bittersweet feelings attached to nostalgia led to an

endless desire for more. Therefore, the nostalgic construction of historicity in capitalist productions cannot ultimately be part of a linear temporal structure, since a cycle rooted in old emotions needs to be rekindled time and again.

Certainly, successful marketing requires more than the production of well-received TV commercials, and it is not the sole intention of this paper to link the TV commercials analysed here with Vitasoy's steady market position in the period covered. Instead, I hope that the examination of the employment of nostalgia in Vitasoy's TV commercials can enlighten us in a number of other respects. First, Hong Kong follows global trends and has successfully localised such trends, as evidenced by Vitasoy's exploitation of nostalgia and local historicity to reinvent its brand. Second, the spatial and temporal interchange in the commercials depicts an experience that may be shared by other postcolonial societies. Compared with the history of other postcolonial societies, Hong Kong's spans a relatively short time frame, and the rapid progression of historical events, political eras, and social transitions in recent times has blurred the memory and identity of the people, making it difficult to draw a line between the past and the present, between colonial identity and postcolonial identity. Finally, from a cultural perspective, the close affiliation between consumption products and social developments brings to light the otherwise neglected currency and worth of historicity in Hong Kong. In view of Hong Kong's unique political status, I have demonstrated in particular that an absence of authenticity and of a linear temporal structure in collective memory should not necessarily lead us to consider historicity as being lost, waning, or regressive. For places struggling to cope with an absence of national identity or a recognised motherland, reflective nostalgia may help. Through the selective rewriting of the past, the present is in fact being contemplated in order to move forward into the future. Nostalgia, in this sense, is not a way of escaping from an uncertain future but rather a constructive approach that requires the recasting of history in the process of reconstructing an identity.

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